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11. (SBU) Summary and introduction: The struggle to form Canada's next government will be between the Conservative and Liberal parties in a federal election that will take place possibly in fall 2008, but increasingly more likely in 2009. Whether the vote results in a minority or majority share of the House of Commons will depend on the outcome of distinctly regional contests in which smaller parties - the Bloc Quebecois and the New Democratic Party (NDP) - will play pivotal roles. The Green Party is also vying for its first seat in Parliament. Polls suggest that Canadians are largely satisfied with the minority status quo, at least for now. The two major parties remain neck-and-neck among decided voters (fluctuating between 30 and 33 percent), but the Conservatives are more election-ready, better-funded, and have a more solid geographical base of support (ref a). With a possible Conservative majority (155 seats out of a total 308 in the lower house) resting on the swing of 28-30 constituencies ("ridings") nationally, regional strength, organization, the parties' ability to hold their core base, and fine-tuning of political messaging will be the keys to successful campaigning. In preparation for an eventual election, Embassy offers the following descriptions of the federal parties that will compete, while ref b provided details on how Canada organizes and funds its national elections. End summary and introduction.

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY - ON THE OFFENSIVE

12. (U) The Conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper is already the third-longest serving minority government in Canadian history and the longest Conservative minority government ever. The Conservatives won 124 seats of 308 national seats (36.3 percent of total votes) in the 2006 election and, following subsequent by-elections, currently have 127 seats. The party has a solid base in Western Canada, where it holds 67 of the 93 seats in the four westernmost provinces and the Yukon Territory as well as all of Alberta's 28 seats. Since 2000, it has made steady inroads in rural and suburban Ontario, winning 41 seats in the province in 12006. The Conservatives made a breakthrough in Quebec province in 2006, electing 10 members in the Quebec City area and eastern Quebec, and then added an eleventh seat in a 2007 by-election. The party also holds eight of Atlantic Canada's thirty-two seats. However, the Conservatives remain shut out of Canada's three largest cities - Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal.

13. (SBU) With its western base largely secure, the Conservatives will be on the offensive in the next federal election, fighting for additional seats in several key two and three-way regional contests: against the Liberals in Ontario and Atlantic Canada; against the Liberals and NDP in Northern Ontario; against the Bloc in rural Quebec; and, against the Liberals and NDP in Winnipeg and Vancouver. The Conservatives reportedly hope to double their seat total in francophone rural Quebec province in the next election, where they are increasingly seen as the most accommodating of the federalist parties. Polls suggest the party is already neck-and-neck with the Liberals in that province, and may even have moved ahead as the leading federalist choice of Quebecers outside of Montreal. The party is also looking for gains in suburban Ontario province as well

as in Vancouver. The Conservative Party is the best funded and election-ready of the major parties, with a solid "core" base of supporters of approximately 30 percent nationally.

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14. (SBU) Party strategists regard PM Harper, its leader since 2004, as the party's greatest political asset and tactician. His cabinet includes senior ministers from Western Canada as well as Ontario and Quebec, including Jim Flaherty (Ontario - Finance), John Baird (Ontario - Environment), David Emerson (British Columbia - International Trade), Stockwell Day (British Columbia - Public Safety), Peter MacKay (Nova Scotia - Defense), and Jim Prentice (Alberta - Industry). In Quebec, Lawrence Cannon (Quebec - Transport) also acts as PM Harper's senior political minister or "lieutenant" in the province, while Maxime Bernier serves as Foreign Minister. However, PM Harper's tendency to centralize decision-making in the Prime Minister's Office - to an even greater degree than his predecessors - has limited his ministers' abilities to carve their own political profiles, leaving the PM as the government's very public face.

THE CONSERVATIVE "BRAND"

15. (SBU) The Conservatives' brand strength lies in "hard" issues such as tax cuts, the economy, security, and tackling crime. The party has already developed its twin campaign themes of "Leadership" and "Getting the Job Done" focusing on government accountability, tax cuts, crime, parental choice in child care, "realistic" environmental choices, stronger defense, and national security. The party will present PM Harper as a decisive, fiscally responsible leader in contrast to Liberal chief Stephane Dion, whom the Conservatives claim is "weak," unable to set priorities, and "not worth the risk."

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16. (SBU) Conservative political messaging targets the middle-class - especially families - and has attempted to align the Conservatives "on the side of those who work hard, pay their taxes, and play by the rules." Popular suspicion of an extreme right-wing "hidden agenda" on social issues has largely dissipated, although the party remains further to the right of majority public opinion on issues such as climate change and same-sex marriage, and the government's alleged "take-no-prisoners" style continues to raise some concerns about whether the public should trust the Conservatives with a majority mandate. Controversy over the future of the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan has essentially disappeared following the March 13 bipartisan vote in the Commons to extend the mission to 2011. Support for the Conservatives remains strongest among men, but lags among urban voters, women, and ethnic minorities. The latter have traditionally supported the Liberal Party, but the Conservatives have made efforts to reach out to specific ethnic groups; the government will, for example, fete Ukrainian President Yushchenko May 26-28 and has invited him to address a fairly rare joint session of Parliament, in recognition of the Ukraine's sizeable diaspora, particularly in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

THE LIBERAL PARTY - HOLDING THE FORT

17. (U) The Liberal Party won 103 seats (30.2 percent of total votes) in the 2006 election, which ended twelve consecutive years of Liberal government. The party currently has slipped further to ninety-six seats. Ontario has been the bedrock of four successive Liberal governments since 1993 and remains the party's primary base of support, accounting for more than fifty percent (53 seats) of the total caucus. The Liberals are a major force in Canada's largest cities, holding all but two of the 22 ridings in the urban core of Toronto, eleven in Montreal, and seven in Vancouver. They are also competitive in Atlantic Canada, where they hold 20 of the region's 32 seats.

18. (SBU) However, the party has only a token presence (six seats) nationally outside the Vancouver-Ontario-Montreal-Atlantic Canadian axis, and the party is now overwhelmingly urban in character. Its longstanding weakness in western Canada (dating back to the 1970s) has been compounded by the collapse of traditional support in Quebec

province, which slumped from 36 of 75 ridings in 2000, to 21 in 2004, and finally to 11 in 2006 as a result of a relatively minor corruption case still known as "the sponsorship scandal." Liberal insiders admit that Quebec support will take years to rebuild and will not rebound before the next election.

¶9. (SBU) Nor do the Liberals have the luxury of a secure bastion akin to the Conservatives' dominance of the West; the Liberals' hold on Ontario is under pressure from both the right and the left in urban as well as rural areas. The party's principal challenge is to shore up urban ridings against the NDP in Toronto, Windsor, and Hamilton as well as in Northern Ontario, and against the Conservatives in rural, small-town, and suburban Ontario, especially the commuter belt around Toronto. It must also hold the line against the Bloc in Montreal, and against both the Conservatives and NDP in Winnipeg and Vancouver. Prospects are brighter in Atlantic Canada, where the party may profit from bitter provincial disputes with the Conservative federal government over natural resource revenues. The Liberal Party continues a process of renewal begun under Dion since December 2006, but remains substantially behind the Conservatives in fundraising, policy development, and election preparedness. Communications also remain a weak link, not only due to Dion's linguistic struggles in English. The party leads among female and urban voters as well as ethnic communities, but lags among the majority of males of all age groups. It has a core base of approximately 28 percent nationally.

THE LIBERAL "BRAND"

¶10. (SBU) The appeal of the Liberal "brand" continues to exceed that of leader Dion, whose personal approval rating sank to a dismal 10 percent in a mid-May poll, a historic low for any Liberal leader. Eighteen months into the job, Dion remains largely a "blank slate" to most Canadians. In contrast to the Conservatives' focus on PM Harper, Dion touts the collective talents of a "Dream Team" of former leadership candidates and current MPs Michael Ignatieff, Bob Rae, Ken Dryden, Gerard Kennedy, and Martha Hall-Findlay, as well as senior MPs Ralph Goodale and Scott Brison. Former astronaut Marc Garneau and Justin Trudeau (son of the iconic Liberal former PM Pierre Trudeau) will run as "star" candidates in the next election. However, approximately 20 incumbent Liberal MPs have indicated they will not run again.

¶11. (SBU) Dion's leadership pledge to create a "richer, fairer, greener" Canada has as yet few details, and his policy of "whipped abstentions" - or "strategic patience" - to avoid votes in the Commons that would bring down the government has left the party's overall policy stance unclear. However, he apparently plans to flesh out a carbon tax plan as the centerpiece of the Liberal election platform over the course of the summer parliamentary

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recess. According to party insiders, the strategy of this former Environment Minister will be to make a bold gesture on a defining issue about which he feels passionately, but some Liberals fear the Conservatives may successfully define it instead as a "tax grab" that voters will not want. Dion's approach appears to be to present this tax -- offset by income and possibly corporate tax cuts -- as part of an economic stimulus package, rather than as a purely environmental issue (ref c). The Liberals will also reiterate traditional themes of "values," promoting social justice, fighting poverty, making investment in cities and infrastructure, improving health and post-secondary education, and better managing aboriginal affairs.

THE BLOC QUEBECOIS - KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE

¶12. (U) Formed in 1990, the separatist Bloc Quebecois fields candidates only in Quebec province's 75 ridings. It will never form a federal government, although it was the Official Opposition between 1993 and 1997.

¶13. (SBU) The Bloc won 51 of 75 seats (42.1 percent of total votes) in the province in 2006. It currently holds 48 seats in a broad swathe of francophone ridings outside Montreal. The Conservatives

have emerged as the Bloc's principal rival in rural, francophone areas of the province. Essentially maxed-out in the Quebec City area, the Conservatives are looking to shake loose Bloc voters even in the sovereigntist heartland of the Lac-Saint-Jean region; in a 2007 by-election, the Bloc lost the sovereigntist bastion of Roberval-Lac-St Jean to a Conservative. Declining support for the Bloc beginning in the late 1990s rebounded in 2004 as a result of the Liberals' "sponsorship scandal." It currently hovers at approximately 40 percent within Quebec province. Since 2006, however, the party has not found any new issue with particular resonance, but it nonetheless retains the advantage of a formidable and proven electoral machine on the ground.

¶14. (SBU) The Bloc pursues a Quebec-centered agenda that leans toward "progressive," left-of-center policies on labor, justice, defense, environmental, and social issues. It strongly supports the Kyoto Accord, same-sex marriage, and gun control. The Bloc opposed the extension of the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan in both the 2006 and 2008 votes in the Commons. As a "junior partner" of the provincial Parti Quebecois, the Bloc has increasingly concentrated on defending Quebec's interests in culture, language, forestry and resource industries, and agriculture following the PQ's decision in 2007 to put Quebec sovereignty on the back-burner. The Bloc co-operates with all opposition parties in this minority parliament on an ad hoc basis where it judges the interests of Quebec coincide, but has taken advantage of the Liberals' reluctance to defeat the current government to oppose the Conservatives with impunity on almost all major issues since 2007.

¶15. (SBU) Gilles Duceppe has led the party since 1997 and is its sole dominant figure. He has denied persistent rumors that he may step down before, or shortly after, the next election. There are no obvious candidates to succeed him, although Duceppe loyalist and deputy leader Pierre Paquette remains the likely future leader.

THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY (NDP) - THE WILD CARD

¶16. (U) The social democratic NDP won 29 seats (17.4 percent of total votes) in the 2006 election, which rose to 30 after it won a rare upset by-election in Quebec province in 2007. It increased its popular vote by only 2 percent from the 2004 election, but added ten new seats in British Columbia and urban Ontario. Twenty-two of the Qnew seats in British Columbia and urban Ontario. Twenty-two of the party's seats represent Ontario and British Columbia. Under Toronto-based leader Jack Layton since 2002, the NDP has continued its transformation from a largely rural western Canadian caucus in the 1980s to an almost exclusively urban party concentrated in Toronto, Vancouver, and Winnipeg. It has pockets of support in northern Ontario and the maritime provinces, in addition to its high-profile single beachhead in Montreal. The party's "core" base of support is approximately 12-14 percent nationwide.

¶17. (SBU) Few of the party's seats are "safe," however. The majority stem from tight margins in two and three-way splits against the Liberals in urban and northern Ontario, and against the Conservatives and Liberals in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Halifax. Even small swings in overall support can produce disproportionate gains or losses. The Green Party's appeal to NDP voters since 2004 further threatens to fragment NDP support. Disenchanted Liberal voters turned to the NDP or stayed home in 2006 over the sponsorship scandal; hanging on to those voters will be a challenge in the next election. The NDP is also highly vulnerable to strategic voting if center-left voters flee to the Liberals to prevent a Conservative majority, underlining the Conservatives' need to handle the NDP with kid gloves in Vancouver and urban Ontario. The party's 2007 by-election win in Montreal (Outremont) raised NDP hopes of a breakthrough in Quebec, but realistically the party will be hard-pressed to hold even this riding in the next election.

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¶18. (SBU) The NDP has never formed a federal government, but exerts influence when it can exercise a certain balance of power in minority parliaments. It is the self-styled "conscience" of Parliament and champion of "ordinary Canadians." Its chief issues are defense of the public health care system, promotion of human

rights and gender equality, improving education and the environment, fighting poverty, and reducing income inequality. The NDP opposed extension of the Canadian Forces' mission in Kandahar, and was the only party to call for immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan. The party maintains ties to organized labor, but these links have slackened over the last decade.

THE GREEN PARTY - THE ARRIVISTE

¶19. (U) Founded in 1983, the Green Party has never won a seat in the Commons, despite fielding candidates in all 308 ridings nationwide in the 2004 and 2006 elections. Its support has ranged between 4.5 percent of total votes in 2006 and fifteen percent in subsequent polls, and it has not fallen below 7 percent in any opinion poll since 2007. With approximately 9,000 registered members, it is the largest federal party in Canada without representation in Parliament. The party claims supporters from all political parties, but leans largely to the left of the political spectrum. The party's platform emphasizes "green economics," investment in green technologies, progressive social planning and taxation, and responsible governance.

¶20. (SBU) The party's lack of a regional base or local pockets of strength makes it unlikely to win any seats in the next election, either. Leader Elizabeth May will run a symbolic but likely futile campaign against Conservative Defense Minister Peter MacKay in his riding in Nova Scotia. However, the party threatens to drain NDP and Liberal support in urban Ontario and British Columbia, particularly if the next election focuses on the environment and the Liberals' carbon tax proposal.

COMMENT

¶21. (SBU) A fall election is the Liberals' last real chance to trigger an election on their own terms before the logic of waiting for a fixed-date election in October 2009 becomes compelling. However, lack of issues with national resonance, fluctuations in regional polls - which belie the stagnation in national polling numbers - and a plethora of distinct regional competitions make the outcome a true gamble. The public seems content to let the Conservatives keep governing for the foreseeable future, at least while Canadian voters continue to watch with unprecedented fascination the more exciting U.S. Presidential race.

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